

Psittacosis (ornithosis, parrot fever, chlamydiosis)

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is an infectious disease usually transmitted to humans from birds in the parrot family, turkeys and pigeons. It is caused by a bacteria called *Chlamydia psittaci*.

Who gets psittacosis?

Since this disease is spread by birds in the parrot family, it is occasionally found in pet store workers and people who have purchased an infected bird. It may also be found in farmers and slaughterhouse workers who process turkeys.

How is psittacosis spread?

Psittacosis is usually spread by inhaling dust from dried droppings from bird cages and by handling infected birds in slaughterhouses. Human to human spread has not been reported. Waste material in the bird cage may remain infectious for weeks.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

In humans, the symptoms are fever, headache, chills and sometimes pneumonia. In birds, the symptoms include poor appetite, ruffled appearance, eye or nose discharge and diarrhea. Occasionally, birds may die from psittacosis. Some birds may shed the organism while exhibiting no symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period may range from four to 15 days but is usually 10 days.

How is psittacosis diagnosed?

In humans, the diagnosis can be made by special blood antibody tests. In birds, veterinarians can diagnose the infection by conducting a special chlamydia test on a swab of fecal material.

Does past infection with psittacosis make a person immune?

Infection does not provide permanent immunity to this disease.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Antibiotics such as tetracycline are often prescribed. Tetracycline is effective in both humans and birds.

What can be the effect of not being treated for psittacosis?

The disease may be severe and result in death, especially in untreated older people.

What can be done to prevent the spread of psittacosis?

If birds are kept as pets, clean the cage often so that fecal material does not accumulate, dry up and become airborne. Current laws require that members of the parrot family that are imported from foreign countries be kept in a bird quarantine station prior to sale. During the quarantine, they are given feed containing tetracycline to reduce the risk of infection, but the duration of treatment is generally shorter than the 45 days necessary to completely treat the bird. Therefore, federal health authorities have recently recommended that breeders and importers ensure that all domestic nestlings and imported birds receive the special tetracycline feed for 45 continuous days in order to prevent the spread of psittacosis from birds to humans.